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Section 6: Strategic Planning

6.1 - Your Role in Planning

Every action taken by the board contributes to the plan of the library – especially when working on the budget, which is one of the most important plans for the next year. Review board, director and staff roles in the planning process in Section 3 of this manual.

But planning for the future is a different kind of activity, an opportunity for trustees to serve the community by looking ahead so that provisions can be made to implement solutions for the longer range needs and expectations.

The New Jersey State Library supports strategic planning as a management tool to determine a library's mission, vision, values, goals and objectives, roles and responsibilities, and to determine benchmarks and timelines that will shape the library's future. All libraries should have an updated strategic plan of three years, initiated by the Board of Trustees. The Strategic Plan charts the library's direction for the future. To provide the best outcome for the provision of effective and efficient library service, it is strongly recommended that the process be guided by someone with experience in facilitating strategic plans for public library service. Resources on the NJSL website include presentations on how to write a strategic plan, required components and sections, information on organizing community focus groups, how to conduct leadership interviews, and discussion guides for different demographics:

http://www.njstatelib.org/services_for_libraries/consulting_services/library_trustees/strategic_planning/

There are several resources that can help you in your planning efforts. Strategic Planning for Results, by Sandra Nelson for the Public Library Association, updates previous planning manuals with a process that involves the community, yet only takes about four months to complete.

Often after planning, you'll be faced with the dilemma of how to reallocate existing resources to meet new service demands. Implementing for Results, also by Sandra Nelson, for the Public Library Association, will help you collect the information you need to make those reallocation decisions.

6.2 - Steps Involved in Planning

Current planning technique suggests that boards assess the library's internal and external circumstances to see what roles the library should fulfill in the community, and then develop a plan that emphasizes one or two of those major roles.

A simplified framework for this kind of planning includes:

- ◆ Strategic vision: the community determines what it wants to become in the future, and sets priorities in cooperation with the library for the library's part in that future.

In this process, the community and the library look at the environment: the community characteristics, changes in the nature of the population, projected growth or non-growth, demands and expectations of the people in the community. The library's internal environment is also important: staff capacity and attitudes, financial resources, the building, the services.

- ◆ Critical issues: the library assesses the changes that must occur in order to obtain the vision.
- ◆ Short and long range goals and objectives: the library sets broad goals for short term and long term periods and develops objectives, which are the steps toward the goals.
- ◆ Resource allocation: the library decides on those goals and objectives to which effort, funds and staff should be allocated. It weeds out the objectives, however desirable, which cannot be achieved or which have secondary importance.

This planning process is pragmatic. Dreaming is encouraged in the preliminary stages but a dream is assigned priority only if the idea has importance when judged against all others. Planning may indicate continuing what you are doing now with improvement. It may not always uncover exciting new ideas. But it will put in perspective what is needed, what is possible and a timetable for progress.

A library board should involve the public in the planning process. You need to hear directly from your customers, **and from your noncustomers**, what works for them and what doesn't. Planning offers an opportunity for the public and other public officials to share their knowledge of the community and become advocates for the library.

6.3 - Elements of a Plan

Whether the planning process is labeled "strategic" or whether it is developed to suit the individual board and community, it should lead to a plan, a document that assembles materials and lays out what the board intends to do about the future of its library. The plan should be used as a reference for all actions taken by the board to be sure that objectives are given priority and that resources are directed to those objectives.

Consideration should be given to the use of consultants in the planning process. These experienced people can assist the director and the board in planning more efficiently and quickly. They have skills in reducing a plan to a manageable size that can be distributed to interested people. Construction Consultants often are also planning consultants: see the NJSL web page at

http://www.njstatelib.org/services_for_libraries/resources/construction_planning/consultants/

What's In A Plan?

- ◆ List of planning committee members
- ◆ A description of the planning process that includes the planning committee and data analysis, focus groups, and staff interviews
- ◆ A Summary of the Current Status of the Library: look critically at what the library does to identify the most obvious needs and directions. (Don't be afraid to brag about a good library. Planning is not criticism; it's the vision that you want to create for the future).
- ◆ An Assessment of Community Needs: a library should respond first to the needs of its community. It is basic to planning to know what those needs are. Statistics needed may

include: population trends; community characteristics as to age, sex, education, income, and occupations. Other information may include requests from focus groups and surveys of library users, community leaders, nonusers, and special and diverse populations.

- ◆ A timeline for achieving the goals in the plan, along with assigned tasks to appropriate staff or consultants, along with a plan for evaluating your progress.

Looking to the future requires anticipating some of the needs. Read the literature on life style changes, seek information on trends in libraries, the emphasis on lifelong learning, and identify special problems in your community. (e.g., Literacy; Unemployment/underemployment; Aging, etc).

- ◆ **Library Mission Statement:** Why does the library exist? What is its purpose? What are the needs is it committed to meet? Make this statement upbeat but realistic. Tell what you intend to do.
- ◆ **Goals and Objectives:** Goals are the general statements about the library's directions and aspirations. Select goals, which can be achieved in a reasonable length of time – or those that serve as interim steps in the long-range plan.
- ◆ **Objectives** are the "how" of moving toward goals. They should be relatively short-range, practical and accompanied by evaluation of progress. They set the framework for the activities, which the library is undertaking.
- ◆ **Rationale for Each Goal:** Why do you wish to move toward a new building or toward a new program? Justify your selection of a particular goal. It's possible the plan will substitute some program in place of existing services. Justify the shifts.
- ◆ **Anticipated Costs:** You can estimate the costs for planned programs. Include the cost of personnel and other operations. The community should be prepared to make an investment.
- ◆ **Provisions for Review of the Plan:** Every plan should be in constant use as a check on current decisions and expenditures. Evaluation should be built in. ALWAYS use a plan as a check against the budget.
- ◆ **Mission Statement that reflects the Community's needs:** Develop a statement you can use again and again about the library as a focal point in the community, make sure you continue to address community needs.

Planning holds the potential for your library and for your community service. Without planning, decisions may be good, but they will be better when framed in a plan for developing better library service.

6.4 - Your Role in Promoting a Plan

Sometimes library boards forget to market the plan into which they have put such thought and effort. Even when the board has involved the public in the planning, it needs to seal the effort by

promotion of the product.

Those who participated in the planning in any way should receive, at least, a warm thank-you and a summary of the results.

Those people in the community who will be part of the plan's implementation (schools, the municipality, the zoning and planning officials, media, other libraries in the community or major organizations, for example) should receive copies with a cover document indicating their roles. Be sure to contact the media and help them understand and publicize your plan. For example, the press may be willing to feature interesting phases of the plan with a series of articles.

Board members are ideal speakers to go before service groups to present an overview of the plan and its potential for benefiting the community.

The community will respond more positively to a library's plans when it sees a project or a need as part of a planned sequence to improve services.